

The Washington Merry-Go-Round

FBI Withheld Data on JFK Slaying

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The FBI withheld from the Warren Commission hundreds of documents about the assassination of President Kennedy.

These are raw FBI files, which the commission requested but never received. They contain no startling information that will overturn the commission's verdict, but they reveal intimately how the FBI handled its most important case.

In the margins of some suppressed memos, the late FBI chief, J. Edgar Hoover, scribbled caustic comments in blue ink. He was critical of almost everyone involved in the investigation, from Dallas police chief Jesse Curry to President Lyndon Johnson.

Confidential notes kept by one top FBI official, for example, quote Hoover as warning: "Johnson may become very dictatorial. We must keep our guard up."

Sources familiar with the suppressed documents say the contents were summarized and submitted to the Warren Commission. But there were some subtle, perhaps deliberate, omissions.

The documents show that Hoover brought pressure on his subordinates to rush out a preliminary report on the FBI investigation before the murdered President's brother, Robert F. Kennedy, returned to his desk as Attorney General.

The confidential notes quote Hoover as instructing his subordinates to get the report out of the Justice Department "before Bobby gets back."

Apparently, the FBI chief also feared Deputy Attorney General Nicholas deB. Katzenbach might tamper with the report before forwarding it to the Warren Commission. Hoover told his aides to alert President Johnson's major-domo, Walter Jenkins.

"Let Jenkins know after report is out of our hands," Hoover directed. "Let Jenkins know what Katzenbach is doing. Might cause long delay. Must not consider any alteration."

Thirteen days after President Kennedy was gunned down in Dallas, Hoover delivered a detailed report to Katzenbach naming Lee Harvey Oswald as the assassin. Katzenbach kept it four days before submitting it to the commission.

The crusty old G-man was furious at the Dallas police chief, meanwhile, for leaking the story that the FBI had investigated Oswald but had failed to alert the Secret Service.

"This is the lowest level in history of Bureau since I have been director," Hoover lamented, according to the confidential notes.

He contended that Oswald had never been seen with firearms, had written no hate letters against U.S. leaders. As a former defector, he also knew he was a marked man whom the FBI was watching.

"With that background,"

grumbled Hoover, "how could he be security risk? No indication of violence so far as our records show. . . . Oswald could have hollered false arrest if we had arrested him."

The FBI chief commented that Chief Justice Earl Warren, who headed the commission, "would have been first one to holler" about Oswald's rights. Citing the criticism of the FBI, Hoover commented: "This is one of the rough ones."

He felt, therefore, that President Johnson should have endorsed the FBI report. "President should have backed up report," complained Hoover, "based on evidence gathered by the FBI."

In private remarks that were never intended to be repeated outside his inner circle, he made deprecating remarks not only about President Johnson but about Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.), who was then preparing to run against LBJ for the presidency.

"Goldwater has no sound advisers around him," Hoover noted. But his comment on Johnson was more deadly: "LBJ's speeches are dull."

The Warren Commission adopted a resolution, meanwhile, calling for "the raw materials upon which any reports given to the commission are based, together

with all raw materials and reports relating to the work of the commission since the date of any and all earlier reports."

J. Lee Rankin, the general counsel, followed up with a "Dear Edgar" letter to the FBI chief requesting the full files "as promptly as possible." But they were never delivered.

A commission lawyer, remembering those days more than a decade ago, told us: "Nobody ever got the FBI's own files." In 1963-64, another staff member pointed out, the FBI "could do no wrong," so no one pressed too hard for their internal records.

Now 12 years after the Kennedy assassination, a fascinating story is still locked in FBI files awaiting a public reopening. We will tell part of the story in future columns. Sen. Richard Schweiker (R-Pa.), chairman of the Senate intelligence subcommittee investigating the assassination, is seeking the full story from the FBI.

Footnote: FBI spokesmen stoutly defended the FBI's findings and the thoroughness of the investigation. They conceded that "informative" and "deliberative" memos were not given to the commission. But "everything they needed was given them. They had all they wanted to make their findings."

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